

HON Lai-chu

Going Home

Without any omen, the train left the station, slowly gaining speed, as if hovering above the rails. The carriage seemed so motionless, neither Ah-Fah nor the other passengers could sense they were being pulled backwards. Only when electric poles, trees, buildings and the sky outside the window began rushing forward, as if abandoning them, did the other passengers stand up, in rising and falling waves, to stagger into forward-facing seats.

Ah-Fah alone remained in his original seat. He no intention of moving. “Advancing and retreating are both just illusions”—this was the response he’d prepared to answer the puzzled look from anyone who sat opposite him. But no one even bothered. Weary bodies and shuttered eyes filled the carriage. The only eyes scrutinizing him belonged to the inverted image of himself in the window. Its painstaking smile took him by surprise.

He’d seen a face like that before. The day he received the court’s bankruptcy order, he left the courthouse to find his creditors and the victims’ family members waiting for him. The next morning, his photograph would be plastered across the city’s newspapers. Standing before the grieving, sobbing crowd, that grinning face was proof enough to the media that he was a cold-hearted businessman. Early that morning, a criminologist took a phone call from a reporter seeking an expert opinion on the man in the photograph. From the image on his computer screen, the criminologist concluded that Ah-Fah lacked the most fundamental social skills.

But Ah-Fah couldn’t recall the presence of any cameras. His mind was crowded with images of swollen eyes and their endless streams of tears. But the eyes all seemed so empty. He could find no reflection of himself in their pupils. As they shouted at him, cursing hysterically, their eyes seemed like orbs of parched, cracked earth.

Looking into Lan-Lan’s eyes, round yet desolate, like some deserted forest, he recalled how long it had been since he had traveled anywhere. As his thoughts wandered to so many irrelevant things, he had trouble focusing on work, spending much of his days in an absent-minded stupor.

Ah-Fah was entirely unprepared to meet someone like Lan-Lan in the factory—with such eyes. One day, in his capacity as boss, he made an inspection of the female employees’ work. He expected the production line to be populated by lifeless young girls, yawning as they repeated the same motions and mistakes. Instead, entering the factory’s temperature-controlled environment, he discovered on the table of each worker a cloth doll. Each doll

was wounded in some way—a mouth askew, a missing eyeball. He also saw that each woman betrayed a peculiar tenderness to the doll she was sewing in her hands. Working tirelessly, they often whispered to their crippled dolls, like young mothers nurturing their own children.

(Years before, the factory had afforded the workers a unique perk. From the pile of dolls that failed quality inspection, each woman was allowed to select a bear, rabbit, orangutan or fox to take back to her dormitory as a companion.)

Watching the women hard at work, heads lowered, Ah-Fah's partner Ah-Lie could not contain his gratification: “They say girls are more obedient.”

Ah-Fah turned and laughed, as if in agreement, but he couldn't quiet his unease. The rumors began a long time ago: it wasn't merely that they ate dinner with their dolls. They would even set out glasses of water for them on their work stations, speak to them before sleeping and hold them when they cried or had bad dreams. After work, when the women gathered to chat, their conversation centered around talk of the dolls—how to knit wool sweaters for them when the weather turned cold, or to plan their lives with the doll's best interests in mind.

Ah-Lie didn't share Ah-Fah's concerns. He simply felt fortunate to have female workers willing to work overtime for free and take fewer vacation days.

As a junior team leader, Lan-Lan felt a responsibility to explain things to Ah-Fah. So she sat in his office, watching him with her big, almond-shaped eyes, and reported the women's day-to-day work situation and monthly production output. “Even if we are sick,” she said, “as long as we can stand, we won't take a day off. Of course, we don't want our wages deducted. And the dolls are not just inanimate objects; they have been brought into this world. As their producers, we must shoulder our responsibility to take care of them.” Lan-Lan's expression was so serious, it verged on anger. Ah-Fah stiffly suppressed a smile.

For such impoverished young girls, on their own and far away from their homes, he knew that those puerile, fake-looking dolls were the only comfort for their lonely spirits.

His thoughts wandered off to a faraway place, like kites over which he'd lost control and could not recover. Just before she turned to leave, all he heard Lan-Lan say was, “Only those dolls which have been properly cared for will earn the love of the customer. I assume you must realize this.”

From that day on, Lan-Lan's melancholy expression took hold of Ah-Fah's heart like a shadow. Each day, before dawn, he would awaken from the same dream, in which he and Lan-Lan would enter the boundless plains of her eyes. There, a winter lake was frozen over,

and he would lie with her atop it until, forgetting the time, they eventually fell through the melted surface. Upon waking, he lacked the courage to face Lan-Lan. He would simply desire his wife with greater frequency, but his restlessness and hesitation was by no means on account of his wife. He knew that his infatuation with Lan-Lan was cut from same cloth as the obsession those immature young women had for their dolls. This common ground caused him extraordinary dread. He would hold his wife's buxom figure ever more tightly, as if only by her pressing down on him until he was practically smothered was he able to know for sure that he was still alive. Substituting one desire for another, he gained a temporary sense of peace and balance.

In a tactfully indirect way, Ah-Fah once consulted his fortune teller as to whether he should enter uncharted waters with Lan-Lan. But before he ever heard the answer, he was interrupted by a phone call from Ah-Lie. The tone of voice was strangely indifferent. Later, he thought, what really changed his life was not the fire itself, but the sound of that voice.

“We're done for. The factory is nothing but ashes.”

It took Ah-Fah a long time before he could accept that Ah-Lie was speaking about a large fire of no clear cause, which had destroyed their merchandise, machinery and hundreds of women workers trapped inside, suffocating and burning to death behind bolted fire escape doors. Ah-Fah could only recall the drive to the factory, the scenery along the way appearing like pallid shadows, as if he were encircled by some net. Finally, seeing his own factory, already unrecognizable, an acrid, burning odor assailed his nostrils, causing an uncontrollable and violent cough. All he could do was stand there, watching the inexhaustible ashes, unable to distinguish between the ashes of newly-produced dolls and those of girls stepping over each other in desperate attempts to save themselves. His cough continued for months. After he recovered, his voice remained unusually deep.

Outside the courthouse, Ah-Fah put up no resistance as grief-stricken strangers screamed at him, pulled at his collar, beat his chest, kicked him in the belly, scratched their fingernails across his face and spat in his ears—until he himself began to cry. No one knew that his were not tears of guilt, but loathing. As it struck him that he had lost everything—Lan-Lan, their merchandise, the factory, his business partner, his customers, his checks, his house, all that he and Ah-Lie once were—the intense pain from the wounds on his body brought him an unexpected consolation.

As their energy waned, the angry crowd began to disperse, leaving only Ah-Fah standing there, his head hung low. The blazing sun illuminated the crest of his head; it felt like a ball of fire.

Ah-Fah could never forget the factory's construction on that lot of open ground: the pile-

driving; the steel framework; the construction workers walking back and forth across the site; the clouds of dust; the buildings gradually ascending higher; the worker with an unfastened safety belt who fell from a scaffold to his death. After the building was completed, appliances and machinery were acquired and staff were employed. Several years later, not far away, another factory building rose up. This fire, which he had not witnessed, burned these buildings to the ground. Dark, thick smoke rose slowly, forming clouds and mist that would linger for days.

As the train reached the outskirts of another city, the carriage began to jolt. He looked up to see the sky stretching away—the old disappearing into the distance, the new approaching. And yet he felt that everything new was receding into the past and everything old was once more coming for him. The dark grey clouds seemed pregnant with rain, and he told himself he should feel happy. Resting his heavy head in his left hand, his unfocused eyes stared ahead. Since infancy, whenever he felt hopeless, his eyesight would gradually slacken, unconsciously, until he could see nothing at all.

Whenever Fay saw Ah-Fah's perplexed expression, she felt an inexplicable sense of gloom, like the clear blue surface of the sea suddenly erupting with garbage. It would bring to mind of all kinds of unpleasant memories, such as the husband who abandoned Ah-Fah and her, the hopelessly filthy wash basin, the eternally occupied lavatory, the rat corpses under the bed, the noisy neighbors, the utter chaos of the weather. Her line-of-sight would eventually return to her dull, mute son. Ever since giving birth to him, she carried him back and forth each day, over hundreds of flights of stairs, from the valley to the plains, from the bus station to her work—until, gradually, he grew into a young man. But each time she stood before that long line of stone steps, she would hesitate, not wanting to keep walking, the weight of her child seeming like an onerous burden. Even if she expended all her strength, it would be difficult to carry him all the way to life's end. All she could do was slap him and say bitterly, “I wish I'd given birth to a piece of roast meat instead.” Once Ah-Fah had recovered, they would continue walking.

Ever since he was a child, Ah-Fah felt that he, his mother and their neighbors—whom they often saw, but never talked to—were all trapped at the bottom of an enormous soup bowl. Each morning, as he opened the door to go outside, his allergic nose would remind him of this. The endless sneezing caused him to feel as if he were completely surrounded by a zone of sedimentary germ deposits. Similarly, at dusk, when he returned from the bus station to the village, it seemed as if the cruelly intense sunlight had been stored in the soil all day, after which the sultry vapor would slowly rise, like a layer of implacable dust, clogging all his pores and senses. He could feel the unstoppable heat flood his entire head. The people who lived in that neighborhood were like a nest of frogs being boiled alive. He always examined

in detail the people who walked by his home. They all had bloated, weak bodies and uneven gaits, which the gaunt Ah-Fah eventually understood to be the result of the accumulation in their bodies of dampness and “evil heat.”

But if Fay ever found him once more lost in thought, she would rap him on the head, shouting: “Exactly what kind of child have I given birth to! His head is full of unspeakable ideas!” She warned him that only by ceasing to think so much would he ever put on more weight and enjoy healthy physical development.

In fact, Ah-Fah did not understand the cause of his mother's unstable moods. All he could do was stay alert, furtively monitoring the changes in her expressions and movements, doing his best to satisfy her opaque expectations before she had a chance to fly into an uncontrollable rage.

After Fay passed away, Ah-Fah did not want to think about her. But he kept finding himself attracted to women with explosive tempers, and indulged in the fantasy of having intimate relations with them. The women he met all thought he was overcautious, and that it was precisely his nervous tenderness that cause him so much torture.

Fay didn't know why she despised her own child. It's just that after Ah-Fah had developed inside her body and finally separated from her and grown up, she continuously felt a loss from not being able to satisfy her desires. She remembers, during her fifth month of pregnancy, she had an intense craving for cake. But the coins in her pocket were insufficient to exchange for anything inside the window of the upscale bakery. All she could do was use flour and eggs from her cupboard and attempt to bake one herself. She didn't know whether she had fumbled the steps or measurements, but the cake in the oven never expanded properly, leaving only a pathetic, lifeless slab of glop. The entire duration of her pregnancy, she never ate a single cake. She named her child Fah [meaning ‘to rise/expand’ when used in reference to baking], as it was the only word that came to mind during that time. Later, whenever she called his name, it always reminded her of a whole world of things she could not have.

Ah-Fah always suspected his name was a homophone of his mother's, like a shadow trailing behind him. He reached this conclusion based on the experience of many sweltering, summer nights. Amidst the sound of coarse breathing at night, Ah-Fah's permanently sweaty body kept him awake. The room was like a boiling cauldron over some intense fire. They dreamed of being able to afford a straw mat to place over the small, narrow bed, but their tight finances wouldn't permit it. Yet Fay always took great care of her long, soft, jet-black hair. In the morning, after carefully washing it, she would stand before the room's only window to let it dry in the wind. Late at night, Ah-Fah would sleep with his head resting on his mother's hair, a small oasis of cool.

During the day, Ah-Fah obediently endured Fay's scolding and beating. By nightfall, however, the light scent of green grass emanating from her lithe body and head caused Ah-Fah to have many pleasant dreams. For many years, they maintained such a relationship, never getting any better, never getting any worse.

After summer had passed, Fay cut her hair neatly, picked up the locks from the floor, and made wigs according to customers' specifications. But with very few orders, she could barely earn a living. Fortunately, she had agile hands with which she could also make plastic flowers, thread beads and sew clothing. But as her hair aged to a dim taupe, and the city's factories moved north, freelance piecework slackened off until finally there was no more.

One rainy afternoon during his last year in high school, Ah-Fah came home and opened the door to find a very large, haggard, anxious-looking man sitting at the living room table drinking tea. Henceforth, every few weeks, different men would board in their home. Consequently, in that room already nearly too narrow for walking, Ah-Fah and Fay now had even less living space. Fay spent nearly the entire day squatting in the oven-like kitchen. Ah-Fah did his homework in the hallway, allowing the guests to occupy the living room, where they would ponder things, mutter to themselves, or have a smoke. The guests slept in their beds, while Fay and Ah-Fah slept on the floor. Never again would he see the stooped backside of his mother immersed in her piecework. All day long, she wore an apprehensive, ingratiating expression, and the frequency with which she shouted at Ah-Fah gradually decreased. When she did shout at him, there was often a guilty explanation: "These men are not really much different than pearls, clothing, plastic flowers or wigs."

According to Fay, these swarthy men were paroled prisoners. Fay and Ah-Fah's duty was to play the role of "forgivers." As long as any member of the community wished to provide such men a temporary home—as a halfway house before re-entering society—they could enjoy a government subsidy and rent waiver.

"There is no better way," said Fay. "They can have a place to stay, and we can have food to fill our bellies."

There were many nights when Ah-Fah and the parolees were unable to sleep. He lied on the hard, cold floor, breathing as quietly as possible so as not to alert their guest that he was still awake. As Ah-Fah watched the man walking back and forth in the darkness, drinking a bottle of beer, then sighing, he suddenly felt that these men in their house, he and his mother, even all the people in the world, were all just criminals and "forgivers."

Ah-Fah felt no fear of them until one day a man in black clothing stood in their doorway with a strong, anxious dog at his side. When Ah-Fah first heard the dog barking in the hallway, he

secretly prayed it didn't belong to their new guest. But when the man and his dog appeared before them, Ah-Fah knew it was inevitable.

"Such a big dog," remarked Fay, once again wearing that obsequious smile, her tone of voice softened. "He doesn't bite," the man guaranteed, then produced from behind him a metal cage just slightly bigger than the dog itself. After getting the dog inside the cage, he carried it into the room, as if he were bringing a special gift that Fay could not refuse. It was only then that Ah-Fah saw the man's clear eyes still bore vestiges of the fierceness of prison life, and that his dog was a being consumed by enmity and fear. After their guest had taken a seat in their living room, there was no room to accommodate the dog. We have no choice," Fay said. "We must place the cage under the wash basin in the kitchen."

During the day, the man left early in the morning to seek work in the city. His dog would press its face against the cage, frequently opening its mouth to reveal yellowing but sharp teeth, emitting a low growl, as if it had accumulated excess energy that could erupt at any time. No matter how careful Fay was, when she washed the vegetables, the dog would bite her pant leg, holding on tightly, not wanting to let go.

At dusk, the scent of food being prepared in different apartments would suffuse the hallway. The man brought his sweat and dirty shoes into their home. He would sit between them, eating Fay's meat pies and cabbage, saying nothing. Fay sat awkwardly next to him, wearing a placating grin.

A social worker visited their home. Sizing up the dog in the cage under the sink, he said, "It should be no problem. You have neighbors right next door and directly across the way. Almost all the tenants in the building can see each other's front doors. If you scream at the top of your lungs, people will rush from all directions to provide assistance and protection." Thus, the social worker determined it would be appropriate for the man and his dog to continue boarding here. But he reminded them: if there occurred any sudden mishap, they should yell towards the door at the top of their voices.

"No man is an island," said the social worker, gravely. "Thus, no home is truly isolated."

When Ah-Fah could no longer endure the dog's provocative howling, he walked into the kitchen and told Fay, "He needs to be walked every day, a chance to stretch his muscles and bones. If you keep him curled up in that cage down there, the poisons in his body will build up, and one day he'll eat us all."

"What else can we do?" Fay squatted before the cage, feeding the dog a blood-drenched slice of beef. As she'd already explained, the parolee refused to allow the dog outside, as he had applied for a job that didn't allow dogs.

Ah-Fah looked at her pallid face. Despite her outwardly calm demeanor, he knew her fingers could be bitten off by the dog at any moment. All he could do was fetch his backpack, place his textbooks and water bottle inside, push open the door gate, and walk straight ahead. As he walked along the hallway, it filled with the sounds of mahjong games, kids crying and people washing rice. He walked very fast, as if something were chasing him. He ran up a flight of stairs, pushed open the exit door, and entered another hallway. A mix of smells assaulted his nostrils. He pushed open another door, entering yet another hallway, and another, until he'd reached the roof terrace. He had finally shaken off the sounds below. He looked over the railing to see that four buildings were encircling an area of open ground, like the bottom of a shallow well. Only then did he realize he'd been circling around a center, the way animals sometimes chase their own tails.

That day, several police officers walked down the hallway, poking their heads in the doorway of each tenant, repeating the same question: "At the time of the incident, did you hear anything unusual?" They all shook their heads, at a loss. But one resident remarked that it was indeed a strangely quiet afternoon. There were no children playing basketball in the middle of the complex; no babies crying; no clamor of TV sets; not even the buzz of a mosquito.

That dusk, as he followed the ever stronger smell of food home, Ah-Fah could only hear his own footsteps. It was only when he reached his door that he realized it was a pungent odor, nothing like the smell of his mother's cooking. He opened the door to see the open cage. The dog was now pacing the lengths of the apartment's walls, slowly and intently, as if measuring the surface area of the apartment. The dog never even looked up at Ah-Fah.

He edged closer, seeing something unusual sticking to the dog's paws. It was blood, sticky and deep red. The dog tracked blood marks everywhere, until the the disorderly room was stamped with wobbly crimson shadows. There was no way to escape the reality of what had happened: the source of the ubiquitous patchwork of blood was the strangely-postured body of his mother splayed out before the cage. Hair covered much of her face. Taking a step closer, he saw the wounds on her thighs and belly, each like a moist ripe flower and also like a bottomless hole. An urge to scream welled-up inside him, but he could not. He was barely able to call the police, giving them the address in a frail voice. After he hung up, he stared at the snake-like telephone cord. His body stiffened. "No good. I can't shout."

For a long while, someone was calling to him from behind. He thought it was the police. But when he turned around, he saw the parolee. The man's face seemed more wrinkled than usual, his scars deeper. Its neck now throttled by a belt, the dog no longer had a ferocious air to him. The animal now seemed like a deflated leather ball. Seeing them, Ah-Fah once more felt an intense desire to scream, but he remained mute.

“I beg you,” the man said, his voice as coarse as sand. “Don't tell them what really happened. If they send me back to the slammer, I'll never have a life again.”

From a large envelope the parolee pulled out a pile of crumpled cash—the bills were like insect corpses—and stuffed them into Ah-Fah's hands. “The dog can't be destroyed either. Otherwise, I won't have a single trustworthy companion.” He kept giving Ah-Fah more cash, until the notes were raining on the floor. The money's hue seemed even deeper than the blood. Ah-Fah thought about imitating the dog's posture and lunging at their necks. But his energy was sapped by an unprecedented sorrow. He remembered a time long ago, when his father visited this house. To demonstrate her indifference, Fay purposely gave his father cold water to bathe in and never even looked at him when he left. As Ah-Fah watched his father walk away, finally disappearing at the end of the road, he felt a similar kind of sorrow.

He had to do something to substitute for the frustration that he could not howl.

So, holding in his arms the piles of cash, he bolted through the front door, down the hallway, the stairs, the main gate, the muddy road, the slope, the endless stone steps and into the bowl-like depression. The scenery flashed by, drained of any color. As he kept running to nowhere in particular, he realized his fist was stuffed in his mouth. When he pulled it out, his mouth was full of blood. As he saw the mangled flesh and white bones of his hand, he knew that the chance to scream was already long gone.

After the train entered the tunnel, everything outside the windows became an expressionless sheet of black. Ah-Fah closed his eyes, desiring a good long sleep. But caught unprepared, he suddenly thought of Fay. Long ago—the first moment that dog entered their home—he had anticipated that such a day might come, just as he was not unconscious of the possibility of relieving his mother of the duty of feeding and cage-cleaning. But upon seeing the dog's cold and cheerless eyes, he could not summon the courage.

He wished he could wipe Ah-Fah's silhouette from his mind, but once more he thought of a certain shameful morning. As he awakened and rolled away from the coolness of her long hair, Fay still breathing evenly, he suddenly felt the large patch of sticky wetness in his underwear.

He knew for certain there was at least one person in this world, perhaps more, who had seen everything he'd done. But he could no more ferret them out than he could escape their spying eyes. He could only lock Fay away in a dark corner of memory. Unless he thought of her, almost no one would still remember she had ever existed.

As the train left the pitch-black tunnel, the passengers all squinted, blinded by the intense sunlight. Ah-Fah leaned against the window. The sky outside was turbid like a mass of unmoveable dust, under which he could see heaps of half-demolished buildings; the arms of cranes tore through walls and ceilings, exposing the rebar and cement underneath. Adjacent to the buildings, between the highway and department store, were several extensive pits, abysses as deep as soccer stadiums. At the deepest part of the pits, construction workers in yellow hard hats busied back and forth; their half-naked, sunbaked torsos could have been mistaken for dregs in a boiler. Upon closer inspection, one could see several dejected-looking workers, towels draped over their shoulders, resting near the waterlogged depression. Gazing into an enormous pit, Ah-Fah felt a force compelling him to fall into it.

Just then, the train's speaker system came to life, alerting passengers they had arrived at the final stop, and were to disembark, with all their belongings.

After the fire, by some unspoken agreement—perhaps a tacit understanding between former business partners—Ah-Fah and Ah-Lie avoided each other entirely. Only by cutting themselves off from any thing or person related to the event, could they possibly forget the factory and their young women workers. For any matters that absolutely required contact, they would communicate via a mutual lawyer friend. The day the court ordered Ah-Fah's bankruptcy, the lawyer said to him, “Starting today, your life will be dramatically transformed. You may not be able to get used to it. But that's just how it is.” The lawyer recommended that the cash-poor Ah-Fah rent a place to the north, where the cost-of-living index was low. “ It's barely accessible by car or foot, but the rents are cheap enough to enable you to live there for some time.” The lawyer neglected to mention that, besides the cheap cost, the cylinder-shaped, elevator-less building could provide a despondent and weary man opportunities to exercise his body and mind through vigorous amounts of walking. As he watched Ah-Fah's emaciated, quivering figure leave, the lawyer felt a certain self-satisfaction for offering such eminently appropriate advice.

The guard was chewing an apple he had just snatched from the refrigerator when, on the monitor of the closed-circuit TV, he saw Ah-Fah enter the property through the wide-open gate. On such a hot, windless day, the weeping willow outside the management office gave no indication of swaying. The high temperature ensconced everything in a haze. The guard's annoyance was by no means on account of needing to hide the apple in a drawer, but that he must, within a very short window of time, make an accurate and precise judgment regarding which expression he should show the approaching visitor. If this were an ordinary visitor dropping by to see one of the tenants, the guard's face should have a polite but not

overly familiar smile; if he were an intruder, the guard must don a stern look and throw him out; if a more formal visitor, the guard should smile and adjust accordingly, depending on whom the person was visiting.

“Who you looking for?” the guard asked, as Ah-Fah entered the management office. The tendons on Ah-Fah’s face unconsciously stretched taut. By the time he thought to relax them, it was already a bit too late.

“Are there any units for rent here?” he asked.

“This is not a hotel,” said the guard, seeming unhappy. In fact, he was simply at a loss for how to respond to this unexpected query. He remedied his statement, saying, “This is not something I can decide.”

“I can afford the rent,” Ah-Fah continued.

“Who couldn't afford that pittance?” The guard knit his brows. “Your qualification to live here depends entirely on whether the majority of the tenants are satisfied with you.” There was nearly a confessional tone to his voice: “First, you must maintain an appropriate smiling expression, especially when you are in public spaces such as the hallway, roof terraces, laundry room or recreation room. Your chief duty is to assist other tenants in maintaining a pleasant mood. When you are in your own apartment, you must keep all windows and doors open. In this 30-degree weather, air must circulate as freely as possible. Of course, don't forget to wave occasionally to the neighbor across the way, or to share some snacks with the tenants next door. Actively participating in—or even organizing—group activities will earn the pleasure of others and can also earn you a reduction in rent.”

The guard pulled a ring of keys from a drawer and handed them to him. “The rest depends on your luck.”

Ah-Fah grasped the keys, asking, “But where is the apartment?”

“That depends on whether the tenants decide to tell you,” answered the guard. Then, as if remembering something, the guard broke into a forced smile. But Ah-Fah had already turned to leave.

It occurred to the guard that all those idle tenants, peeping through the iron latticework of their rear windows, had surely already seen this outsider enter the property. Although the management office was covered in the shade of trees, the guard had a distinct feeling that his expression just then had already been thoroughly monitored by many tenants. He could even foresee that someday soon, at an unexpected moment, his superior would summon

him, and tell him of the surfeit of tenant complaints about him, just as had happened many times before.

The guard watched Ah-Fah walk away. Intuitively, he sensed that Ah-Fah would soon become one of them. He plopped down on the sofa, absentmindedly took a lighter from his pocket and lit-up his tenth cigarette of the day, right there under the “No Smoking” sign.

As Ah-Fah left the air-conditioned office, the broiling air weaved tightly around him. Workers were paving the property ground with stones, kicking up billows of dust. The sky’s bloated clouds weighed heavy on him, as if about to collapse over his head. He clutched the numberless keys, thinking he ought to just walk out of this chaotic place. But a wind blew through the trees, rustling the leaves and making an unusual sound, much like Fay’s voice: “The rain is coming,” she would say. “It’s going to be chilly.” It reminded him of long ago, the first time Fay brought him into that gloomy, dirty apartment. She consoled him, saying, “Don’t be afraid.”

Ah-Fah followed the staircase up to the circular corridors of the building, seeking his apartment. He expected to find tenants relaxing and cooling off in the hallways; in their looks, expressions and corners of their mouths, he would seek hints of approval or disapproval, with which to decide whether to insert a certain key into a certain door. But there was no one in the hallway. The doors of the apartments, however, were all open.

He kept walking. Inside one of the apartments, someone lazed about on a bed, one leg thrown over the other; in another, someone watched TV; next door someone hacked up bones on a chopping block; in yet another, someone tied up a child. Inside one apartment, he saw a woman taking off her bra. In the adjacent unit, a man leaned against his door, reading a book; as his line of sight intersected with Ah-Fah, both men pretended not to have seen each other, quickly glancing away.

Before he arrived back at his starting point, he went up another staircase to the next floor. All the doors were open here too. He leaned against the railing and scanned the units across the way. Inside one door, a man and woman were kissing. Inside another, a man stared at a knife. Inside another, several people were gambling. He couldn’t endure the notion of people in so many apartments simultaneously doing so many different things. Suddenly, he thought of Fay’s habit of always bathing with the door open. She would say, “Only when we become part of the scenery, will others lose the desire to spy.”

Ah-Fah hesitated as to whether he should jump over the railing. He leaned over to see that the center of the oval-shaped building complex resembled the bottom of a well. The sun’s

brightness made him dizzy, and this is when he recalled a number: 305. That was his and Fay's apartment number. It had been so many years since he had thought of this number. Ever since he moved out of the building in that deep valley, seeking work at a factory, then opening his own factory and living in an apartment with a balcony, all trace of this number had vanished from his mind.

He turned around to look for Apartment 305. After circling the hallway several times, he found it, a corner place, the door half-open. He went inside. There was a small living room and two small bedrooms—one door opened, the other closed. He entered the room with the open door, set down his backpack, collapsed on the bed, and slept unusually soundly.

After Ah-Fah awoke, he thought it was raining outside. But fingers of sunlight had already extended to each corner of the room. The morning light was so glorious, one might have doubted that night ever existed. Only when he looked out the window did he realize that the pitter-patter of raindrops he thought he heard were in fact the sound of footsteps in the hallway. Each of the tenants emerged from their apartments carrying a plastic basin, in which were neatly-folded bedsheets and overcoats. They walked single-file along the hallway to the open ground in the center of the building complex.

Ah-Fah recalled the guard's words. He must become one of them in order to have a chance at living there. From the closet, he took out a green plastic basin and placed his clothes inside. He went outside and joined the end of the line. His smile was ambiguous. No one told him their destination, nor did they show any hint of rejecting him. The line moved forward, down the staircases to the basement, which was enclosed in an oval shape by the connected parts of the building complex. In the middle was a garden full of sunflowers, the tallest one stretching towards the sun. The stairs cut the sunlight into circles of light which cast their rays onto the cement floor.

In an orderly manner, the tenants hung their bedsheets and clothing on the stairway banisters to dry in the sun. Then they each found a spot of sunlit ground, grasped their knees, squatted down and lowered their heads between their knees and arms, remaining silent and still for a long time, like sealed cocoons.

Ah-Fah found a gap, then imitated their posture, huddling into a ball and submerging himself into the dark shadow of his own body. All he could hear was the ebb and flow of his own breathing and his panicked heartbeats, sounding like frightened rats scurrying through the chaos of night. He closed his eyes.

He saw Fay combing her head of gray hair before a mirror, her face now webbed with wrinkles. In another room, his estranged wife wrote a note to remind him of the brand name of his hair regrowth formula. Adjacent to that room was his former factory office, where

Lan-Lan reported to him the production schedule of each doll model. Through the glass window of the office, he could see Lan-Lan's doll at her sewing station—a yellowish-brown fox, about the size of an infant held in someone's hand, with half its tail missing. Never before had he seen them so clearly. It was if they had been there all this time, quietly living their lives, constantly changing. And since all the doors were open, there was no need for keys.

He raised his sweat-drenched head, unconsciously betraying a cheerful smile. His line of vision just happened to meet the eyes of the man standing next to him. Only then did he see many other heads also raised, smiles rippling across their faces. Their looks pierced through him, but he could not be certain if they saw the true him, just as he could not know if he had seen the true them. The smiling expressions on all of their faces were so sincere, however, a passer-by would have mistaken them for members of the same family.

Supervising them from the top of the stairs, the guard smiled too. The sun-drying activity, held early each Sunday morning, was the easiest part of his job. All he had to do was to stand at a designated position, watching a group of people enjoy the sunshine. It required neither mental effort nor any specific demeanor. According to the activity's founder—the owner of this complex, and a sincere believer in fortune-telling—“only by eating the sun can one truly acquire happiness. If you are unable to eat sunshine, then do your best to collect its energy.” Sunlight not only kills germs, he believed. It also purifies. Those tenants who felt unwell or suffered heatstroke during the activity would soon be encouraged to leave the community.

It was an extreme minority of the time that the guard truly enjoyed his work. After a short while, his mouth cracked into a cheerful smile, revealing his gold molar. He looked every bit the exemplary guard. It's just that no one was there to see it.

Translated from the Chinese by Christopher Barden